

## **A bridge too far: is a degree the right path?**

Studies of graduate destinations generally report positive outcomes for working-class graduates, particularly professionally validated programmes such as pharmacy or social work, which offer specific career pathways.

However, I know of working-class graduates with good degrees from good institutions who are in relatively menial positions in the leisure and retail sector. It is as if such students are unable to move beyond working-class jobs and embrace the middle-class careers that a degree should unlock.

This is not a new phenomenon. Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden's classic 1962 text *Education and the Working Class* illustrated that even working-class children educated at grammar schools still often ended up in traditional working-class jobs.

The reasons can be diverse, but as the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggested, they include a deficiency of cultural and social bridging capital, lower levels of self-assurance and commercial awareness, and very often an inability to enter or exploit the fertile professional networks that might boost confidence and alert them to employment options and opportunities. This leaves working-class graduates in ignorance of why they have not received even an acknowledgement of their application, let alone an invitation for interview.

My university, which has a lot of working-class students, scores well overall for graduate prospects and offers a rolling schedule of excellent programme-level careers advice and one-to-one support, both throughout the course and for many years beyond. We also have a mentoring programme, primarily to help students better understand the workplace and what is expected of them. Such schemes, common across the UK, are welcome as many students do not appreciate the importance of organising themselves and their CVs in their final year at university.

But while I strongly support widening participation initiatives, I also think that university applicants should be helped to think through their career aspirations and to consider whether a degree is really necessary. Higher-level apprenticeships, for example, are an alternative way of learning at university while accessing a professional qualification in areas such as business management, law, financial services, policing, engineering and IT.

With many apprentices remaining with their training employer, it would seem that for some working-class students, getting "one foot in the door" without having to study full-time for three years is a viable remedy for deficits in their social bridging and networking.

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